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IRRIGATION SCHEMES OF THE WEST.

BY

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The fact that innumerable bills having for their object the irrigation of western lands at the expense of the government are now before Congress, is responsible for the republication of this paper, which presents strong and convincing arguments against the government's carrying out any such line of policy. As a United States legislator you will be called on to consider these unjust and abominable measures, and you are asked to peruse this article carefully and to weigh the arguments presented in an impartial and unprejudiced manner before casting your vote.

THE IRRIGATION SCHEMES OF THE WEST.

When a dog is about to lie for a nap, you will notice that he is very apt first to go through a perfectly useless and seemingly unmeaning performance hardly in character with his wonderful sagacity which so closely approximates the intelligence of man. He turns round and round two or three times in a little circle, his head about touching his tail. Why does he do it? Simply because his savage ancestors, thousands of years ago, living in forests undergrown with brush and weeds, noticed that they were more comfortable in their hours of repose if they first constructed in this manner a rough nest or bed. The turning round was to level the plant growth and smooth it down into a sort of mattress. What was at first a perfectly reasonable and commendable procedure, taken under the guidance of something very closely resembling intelligent thought, came in time to be instinctive—that is to say, it was and is performed under an unthinking impulse; and the instinct became ultimately so fixed in the race, so runs in the doggish blood, one may say, that it dominates the actions of the remote descendants of those early canine creatures to-day. The dog continues to perform, without necessity, sense or purpose, on a soft carpet or a smooth wooden floor, the operation which his far away ancestors performed, with very good reason, in the rank undergrowth of their native forests. The practice goes right on, centuries after changing circumstances have utterly destroyed its original value.

Similar occurrences of the persistence of superannuated practices are very frequent through the whole domain of animal life; and man is not exempt. Many ideas and beliefs, once sound, con-

tinue to influence human life long after they have entirely lost all application and fitness to a later environment, and have therefore become at least useless, in many cases positively detrimental to prosperity. Such ideas and beliefs, inherited from past generations and still cherished, without reflection or consideration of altered circumstances, dictate to a lamentable extent the policy that governs in our time the management of the public domain, still the property of the people.

Time was, say a couple of centuries ago, or even not quite so far back as that, if you like, when every foot of extension of the civilized occupation of this country back into the wild interior, every increase in population not positively vicious, was in many ways a real and solid gain to the people of the American provinces. Occupying as our forefathers did but a narrow strip of land along the Atlantic coast, with only inchoate manufactures, very slow and uncertain communication between different sections, and agriculture not much more than adequate to provide for very modest living, the one thing that was wanted before all others was development of the nation. The father of a large family of stalwart sons and daughters was most distinctly a public benefactor. As the children moved westward, bringing into cultivation acre after acre of new soil, and thus supplying better and better the needs of a growing population and enlarging the material resources of the common stock, they were laying broad and deep the foundations of the future greatness of the nation, and every pioneer deserved a godspeed from all well wishers for mankind. If any central authority had at that period exercised effective control over the unoccupied lands that stretched off, seemingly without limit, to the west, it could not possibly have done a better thing for all concerned than to facilitate by every means within its power the taking up of these lands as fast as possible by anybody who could be induced to occupy and cultivate them. Pioneering and homesteading were philanthropic occupations of the very first order of necessity and merit.

But it must never be forgotten that the circumstances of the seventeenth century in this country were radically different from

those that surround us at the dawn of the twentieth; and that many lines of public policy once eminently laudable have become obnoxious and dangerous as times change. When a baby weighs ten pounds, it has just one alternative before it—grow, or die; when in after years the ten pounds has become two hundred, the condition of affairs is changed; further increase is suggestive rather of dropsy than of growth. The behavior most suitable to the infant nation, just stretching its unformed limbs and not yet quite certain what sort of creature it will grow to be, becomes in the highest degree absurd and detrimental when maturity has been attained, and the former infant has reached the understanding and the enjoyment of the powers of manhood. Of this obvious fact, in its relation to a rational management of the public domain, sight has largely and most unfortunately been lost by the American people. We go on hurrahing for every increase that successive censuses show in our population, with very little consideration of the quality of the people that have been added—in our agricultural area, with very little consideration of its actual value to the nation—and above all, in our production of crops, without any consideration at all of the profit of growing them or the real financial condition of the men who are feeding half the world. We go on turning round and round like the dog, merely because our ancestors did so and we take it for granted that that must be the proper thing. To sum it all up in a nutshell: Time was when every enlargement of our agricultural area conduced to the general welfare; such enlargement does not conduce to the general welfare now—quite the reverse. All the same, we go on tranquilly permitting if not actively encouraging such enlargement, and felicitating ourselves on that which is really, though insidiously, bringing upon us a train of appalling evils.

Before endeavoring to indicate definitely what some of these evils are, and the ponderousness of the weight that they are throwing upon our financial prosperity, let me make a plain statement of the speed and energy with which the government is dissipating and worse than dissipating our priceless heritage of culti-

vable lands, the property of the nation at large, and transforming what ought to be a blessing into a veritable curse.

According to the reports of the General Land Office down to July 1, 1899, the latest available, the average rate of alienation of our public lands for the decade last preceding that date was nearly 11,500,000 acres per annum, which is approximately 1,000,000 acres per month, over 31,000 acres per day, about 1,300 acres per hour, more than 21 acres per minute, or say one acre every three seconds, day and night, Sundays and holidays all included. Let us try to picture to ourselves what these figures mean. They mean that more than 17,000 square miles, an area considerably larger than one-third of the State of New York, is given away, practically given away, every year of our lives; nearly 1,500 square miles, considerably more than the State of Rhode Island, every month that passes; more than two square miles every hour. Imagine yourselves standing at the boundary, if there were such a boundary, between the land now the property of individuals and that which still belongs to the nation at large, and seeing that boundary moving before your eyes into the government possessions at such a rate of speed that the latter were steadily shrinking, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, at the rate of 21 acres per minute! Such is the rapidity with which we are energetically squandering our most inestimable possession. Our property burns our pocket, as they say of a spendthrift's money, and it seems that we shall never rest easy until we have dissipated the whole.

Now, of course, you will say at once: "Well, well, but we are not giving the land away; the national treasury gets something for it; and besides, we are developing the country. What in the name of common sense is land good for, arable land, if not for civilized man to cultivate? We are giving homes to the homeless of all the world. There is no grander chapter in the history of mankind than the filling up of our great western territory with industrious, intelligent, free and happy people."

Let us consider these points.

The return that the government receives from the average of all its agricultural land parted with, year after year, comes to so little more than enough to pay for the actual expenses of marketing it, that this return may be left out of the question. And then, it must be borne in mind that with the rapid increase of population in this and other countries and the consequent constant increase in the demand for food, it is perfectly certain that these wild lands of ours will be worth very much more, will actually command a much higher value in cash, if held and sold only on business principles, during the time of each successive generation than during the time of that which last preceded it. We are forcing upon a market already fearfully oversupplied the property for which the future is positively certain to bring a vastly increased demand at vastly higher prices than can now be secured for it. For all practical purposes, the lands are given away.

But we are furnishing homes to the homeless, and developing the country! A great many birds have been caught with that chaff. A farm is primarily a factory, only incidentally—and accidentally—a home; keep that distinction very clearly and sharply in mind, I pray you. Of course the owner may live on the premises; so may the owner of a cotton mill. But in every respect in which the occupancy of new farms at the far west affects the interests of the present owners of the property out of which they are carved, the people of the United States, each new farm is to be considered entirely as a new factory, entering directly into competition with those now established.

And as to developing the country: The long life of the passion for accomplishing that very indefinite feat is a straight case of the dog's turning round before he lies down because his ancestors discovered that the practice, under the circumstances then surrounding them, conduced to their well being. A century ago, no doubt, the country needed development; but, great heavens! what is the haste to develop it further just now? Are we not numerous enough, strong enough, as a people? Could any nation on earth dream of invading our territory? What in the world are

we gaining, what can we possibly gain, by this frantic, breathless haste to develop, to fill up our whole country with people, any and every kind of people, foreigners very largely, the offscourings of the earth in no small part? Whoever has leaned on the forward rail of a westbound Atlantic steamer and watched for a while the immigrants on the steerage deck below, as I have done many times, must pray earnestly for the day when America shall most definitely go out of the business of offering an asylum to the downtrodden of every clime. What does it profit us? For my own part, I think the development, the filling up, is going on far too rapidly to be a healthy process; and I am very sure that the not inconsiderable fraction that comes to us yearly from abroad is something that we could very, very well manage to dispense with.

And now for what is after all the one main point of practical interest. How are we injured—we, the farmers of the Eastern States, and the classes that depend directly upon the farmers of the Eastern States for prosperity—in what way, definitely and exactly, are we injured by the liberality of the government in giving away its wild lands, our wild lands, as fast as possible, to anybody and everybody that will take them?

In the first place, of course one thinks naturally of the competition of the products of the new farms, in the markets of the world. I am inclined myself to the opinion that the injury in this direction is rather less than might be supposed, and that it is in fact very far from being the darkest element of the problem. The growth of population must of itself take care of the increased production, in part. The new farmers need an infinity of things that they cannot possibly produce. That helps manufactures; manufactures require workmen; workmen must eat; and thus the established farmers of the older regions will find a certain increase in the demand for their products, making up, *in part*, for the new supply thrown upon the market by their increasing competitors. And then again, the price of breadstuffs is very largely governed by the yield of crops abroad and the occurrences of every kind that take place in foreign countries. Wheat *may* bring a high price, though the American crop be immense; it *may* go begging, though our fields yield the scantiest return. Still, of course, it is

patent that on the whole every new State in an agricultural region will for a long time export a considerable surplus of foodstuffs of some sort, and thus act distinctly, to a certain extent, in bearing down the market price. Most assuredly, after making all allowances, the competition of the new regions in selling just what we want to sell, is a danger and an injury that must be taken into the account. But that is only the beginning.

A second channel of mischief is the absorption by the free lands of the men and women who ought to supply, and in the normal condition of things would supply, an abundance of labor, at moderate wages, for established farmers. The demand for trustworthy farm help, at prices that farmers can afford to pay, is left largely unsatisfied—to the injury of the farming interest, and perhaps most of all to the overburdening of the wife of the small farmer with tasks of which hired servants should greatly relieve her—by the facility with which the persons who ought to supply it can go west and become farmers on their own account, your property and mine being freely offered them for that purpose. Why should anybody work for you, except perhaps at extravagant compensation, when the government is willing and anxious to make him a landed proprietor himself, without money and without price?

Nor is it farm *labor* alone that is drawn away from its natural homes by the recklessness of Uncle Sam in giving everybody a farm. A class of people better off financially go west also and take their money with them, the class among whom the farmer looks for tenants if he wishes to let his property, for purchasers if he wishes to sell. Why should a man of some means hire your farm or buy it, if he can get one of his own for nothing, grow up with the country, and presently land in Congress and go to making laws for you and the rest of us?

Now notice, please, how these three wrongs converge to drain the very lifeblood of the established farmer who has bought his farm and paid for it, or (still worse) owes something on it. The value of his crops is reduced by unfair and illegitimate competition; the supply of labor that he needs is minimized and therefore its price enhanced; and the class among whom he ought to be able to find tenants or purchasers is immensely restricted. The same malign influences act, of course, on all his brother farmers. Their

profits, like his, are immensely diminished, and many of them, like him, are offering their farms to anybody who will pay a good rent or buy at a reasonable value. Thus an unnatural and intensely pernicious competition is set up—set up by our own government, mind you, for which we pay—between farmers of the older States, for the disposal of their property. So, of course, the value shrinks; the farmer falls out of the rank in the social scale that he ought to hold, because his property has so little money value; for, say what you will, a man's standing in society is regulated very largely by his supposed financial means. And if he wants to borrow money on his farm, he finds not only that it will be valued far below what would be normally a reasonable sum, but also that lenders are rather loth to advance money on farm security at all, because the sale of such property is slow and uncertain.

It is maddening to think of. The American farmer ought to be the most independent being on earth, and one of the most envied. Of all property in this country, a farm ought to be the most desired and the quickest in demand. There should be a dozen would-be purchasers or tenants bidding against each other for every farm that there is supposed to be a chance to get. Farm mortgages should be the most sought for of all investments, and the interest should be reduced, by competition of lenders, to about half of what now has to be paid, while the amount that can easily be borrowed should be about twice what it is now. It is all very well to blame the farmers of the older States for bad management when they fail to make money, and hoot at the idea that "farming don't pay." The marvel is that it pays as well as it does; the glory of the eastern farmer is that he can make headway at all, with this horrible burden on his back.

Now consider the equities of the case. This is no sort of a sectional plea, no setting up of one part of the country or one class of our people as entitled to any kind of special favor from the government or special protection from competition. Not a bit of it; nothing like it. The simple fact is just this: The public lands belong to the people at large, and it is distinctly opposed to the interest of the people at large that any more of them should be brought into cultivation, because our great basal industry, the industry on which all other American industries depend, is agricul-

ture, and agriculture is depressed, its profits reduced, by every increase of our cultivated area.

Finally, what is to be done about it? It is too late now to hope for repeal of the homestead laws and similar out-of-date legislation in time to do much good. Ten years ago next October, when the journal with which I have the honor of being connected began the first regular attack that has ever been made on our outgrown and now suicidal national policy of dealing with the public domain, a very large area of arable land was still the property of the nation, and the work of giving it away, to the unspeakable injury of the owners, might well have been arrested. But I am sorry to say that it was then, as it very largely still is, quite impossible to rouse the class most directly interested, the farmers of the older States, to any sort of energetic action for the protection of their own well-being. Farmers' organizations, as a rule, have devoted themselves to all sorts of rainbow chasing, or have frittered away their energies on matters deserving enough, perhaps, but of very trifling consequence in comparison with the immense importance of attacking the one great evil. Very few individual farmers could be induced to call up the matter in granges or similar bodies, or even to interview their own representatives in Congress and urge them to action. Considerably more than a hundred millions of acres—just think of it, a hundred millions of acres—have been given away since then, with hardly an audible protest from the class who were daily robbed and impoverished by the operation, until now it is almost within bounds to say that there hardly remains a desirable homestead in any State washed by the Mississippi or its affluents; and they are scarce anywhere. As the last Year Book of the Department of Agriculture says, "all the best parts of the public domain have been appropriated, and comparatively very little good agricultural land remains open to settlement." One might think we were within sight of the beginning of the end of the mischief, and might hope now for a slow improvement, the supply of wild land being nearly exhausted, while our population is increasing by leaps and bounds.

Lay not that flattering unction to your soul. We are merely entering upon a second stage in the work of spoliation. Animated by an intensely selfish and narrow desire for the so-called devel-

opment of their own States and Territories at the expense of the great body of the nation, the people of the far west are raising in increasing volume, year by year, a demand for the irrigation of the immense area of arid lands now the property of the United States, that at least a hundred million acres more may be brought into the market to compete with your property and postpone to the indefinite future the time when the possessor of a good farm shall be, as he ought to be, an object of general envy. The demand for this outrageous robbery of the people takes two forms. The plot at first was to induce Congress to irrigate this vast area at the national expense—at your cost and mine—that it might be rendered attractive to new competitors in our own industry and divided among them. This scheme of open robbery, however, was a little too barefaced to be very dangerous. Nobody could help seeing that it was just like asking Congress to build factories and give them to any impecunious but enterprising applicant that came along—imagine what our manufacturers now in business would say to that! This plan therefore is not, just at present, pressed very actively, though still rearing its horrid front, in some form, during every session.

But another scheme has been devised, to which it is hoped there will be less objection. It is simply for the national government to give, give out and out, all our arid lands to the States and Territories in which they happen to lie, in order that the local authorities may do the irrigating themselves. Just think of it. These lands are the property of all the people, just as much the property of the farmer in the northeast corner of Maine or at the extremity of the Florida peninsula, as of the people who live around them; five-sixths of all our population are east of the Mississippi and Missouri; and yet it is seriously proposed—yes, vehemently urged—that their ownership in the lands referred to be taken from them by force and given to the handful of people in the newer regions, these people themselves being chiefly the beneficiaries of the previous injustice of the government under that miserable old homestead law, that the property may be used directly and actively to the injury of the present owners. It is difficult to speak with patience of a proposed iniquity like that. If some of our Montana friends who are doing their best to bring it about were owners of valuable lots in Boston, which they pre-

ferred to keep vacant until a growing demand should bring an increase in their selling value, and the Bostonians living round these lots should endeavor to seize them, under color of developing Boston and providing homes for the homeless, one can imagine the indignation of the owners and the opinion they would express of the conscienceless rapacity of the plotters. The shoe is on the other foot; it is not their ox that is gored; and the plotting and scheming goes bravely on.

This brings us directly to the answer to the question—no matter about the past; what is now to be done? Just exactly this. Let every man of you resolve to exert himself in all proper ways (and there are many) to kill every bill that comes before this present session of Congress and every future session for the irrigation under any pretense of the arid lands, or for the giving of them away to the States in which they lie. You can accomplish infinitely more than you perhaps suppose, if you will use your power. The editorial pages of the *Country Gentleman* will keep you constantly informed of every one of these miserable bills as it comes up, giving definitely the number on the calendar, the name of the introducer, and the committee to which it is referred. Let every man who hears me sit down then, immediately, and write a personal letter to his Senators or to his Representative, according as the bill makes its appearance in the Senate or in the House, and also to the chairman of the committee having it under consideration, invoking his active opposition. Let him ask all his neighbors to do the same. Let him see that his grange, or any sort of agricultural union with which he may be affiliated, adopts ringing resolutions of protest, and that the secretary sends copies to the Representative and the Senators. God helps those who help themselves. If the farmers of the East permit the far-western schemers to pursue their course of determined spoliation, enriching themselves, indirectly perhaps, but not the less really, at your expense and mine, the farmers of the East must expect conditions increasingly unfavorable, year after year, decade after decade, for themselves and for their children; must expect that increasingly severe and unintermitted toil will yield increasingly meagre returns; and must expect themselves to descend gradually but steadily in the social scale till there shall be none so poor to do them reverence. In time, no doubt, a century or two perhaps,

conditions must change again, as our increasing population makes larger and larger demands for food, while the supply of land on which it can be raised becomes proportionally smaller. But there is no earthly need to postpone the beginning of this recovery to an indefinite epoch in the uncertain future. Let the farmers of the East put forth but a mere fraction of the power which they most properly hold, if they would only use it, over our national legislation, to stop this tremendous and tremendously cruel and unjust competition by the beneficiaries of our own government, and especially to strike at this hydra of an irrigation scheme in all its phases whenever it appears, and the possible prosperity of the vague future may be realized within our own time, in a solid financial return for that form of labor which most deserves the triple boon of a bright and hopeful youth, a contented mind at maturity, and a competence with honor in declining years. Not, of course, that any legislation, or the absence of any legislation, can of itself make all farmers prosperous, any more than any legislation, or the absence of any legislation, can of itself make all men honest and prevent cheating. But although legislation is often impotent for good, it is always, if unwise or unjust, almost omnipotent for evil; and at the present time unwise and unjust legislation creates the one only cloud in the otherwise bright sky of American husbandry. To prevent the enactment of unwise and unjust laws, having for their sole purpose the enrichment of a comparatively restricted section of the country at the expense of all the rest—this is the one paramount duty of the hour.